THE FORGOTTEN PIONEER

By

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FIFTY-five years ago this spring there arrived by chance in the city of Havana, Cuba, the "Apostle of the Indians," Henry B. Whipple, bishop of Minnesota. He had been sent to visit Haiti, but missing steamer connections, found himself in Havana. He said to himself, "God in His providence has brought me to Havana for some wise purpose."

The result was the coming to Cuba the following November of the forgotten pioneer, Rev. Edward Kenney. He was the first American pastor in Havana and the whole island, he operated the first hospital for foreigners, secured and maintained the first cemetery for foreigners, opened the first Sunday School, did the first work among seamen, Chinese, and Negroes, did the first evangelical missionary work in Cuba, and accomplished all this during the time of the Ten Years' War and through several yellow fever epidemics. No foreigner in Cuba has ever been more of a hero than was Edward Kenney. Yet he has no memorial, and few now living have ever heard of his name.

Edward Kenney was twenty-three years old, recently graduated from Nashotah House and recently ordained, when he reached Havana in November, 1871. Hamilton Fish, Secretary of State under President Grant, had advised him not to go, on the ground that it was an extremely hazardous undertaking. Here in Havana the American consul general and others advised him to return home, as nothing could be done. He had arrived just a few days after the execution of the medical students. Everything was in a state of excitement and confusion. But Edward Kenney was not the kind to turn back.

He began by holding services, as he says, "in the harbor of Havana, under the guns of one of our largest monitors. We had large congregations and many communicants, hearty response and good Church music." Next he sought refuge on shore at the United States consulate, and having crept along thus far he then established a chapel in the south wing of the Hotel Pasaje. At first the services were held behind closed doors, and there was no singing. But later the captain-general recognized the character of Mr. Kenney's work and gave permission to worship openly in the city. Byron Andrews, a representative of the Chicago "Inter-Ocean," who accompanied General Grant in his travels around the world, wrote from Havana in 1880 in high praise of Mr. Kenney, who he said had gathered the Protestants into "one common flock."

Indifference, infidelity, immorality were not absent in the foreign colony in Havana—the natural result of years of deprivation of religious privileges. Mr. Kenney had to carry on his work quietly and by personal contact and invitation. The public press could not be used until 1880. At first notices of services could not be posted. Later, when posted, they were torn down. To fulfill even the ordinary duties of a Christian pastor was almost a heartbreaking task.

Even more awful and appealing was the need of pastoral care of the sick and dying. Hundreds of Protestant people were dying at Havana and other Cuban sea ports every year of yellow fever. At first Mr. Kenney was not even allowed to visit the sick, but within a few years the governor allowed him to have spiritual and also practical charge of one of the largest hospitals. So wonderfully did he win his way! In 1876 he reported that the hospital had been much improved, the nursing was the best that could be secured, and the doctors were the ablest in the city. Mr. Kenney made over 2,700 visits to the sick that year and said that the mortality amongst the merchant marine had been the worst since 1858. "Our captains and brave seamen," he wrote, "have sickened only to die, and many have been the sorrow-laden messages which we have been compelled to send to dear ones at home." There were also numerous cases of destitution to be relieved.

In his report in 1875 Mr. Kenney said, "When I commenced work in this institution (the hospital) our dead were being buried like beasts—without coffins, and frequently the clothes were torn from the bodies, and naked and without a word of prayer our dead were consigned to a pit or a trench. We now have a plot of ground outside of the city, where the dead are buried decently in coffins. This is a work which must be cared for, and the fact that we are endeavoring to do it,

and are confronting and conquering the usages of the past, gives greater strength to the cause of Christianity on the Island of Cuba than all the sermons that might be preached."

A visitor to Havana wrote home in 1877 that Mr. Kenney himself shrouded the bodies of the dead, placed them in coffins and attended their burial.

In 1879 Mr. Kenney wrote, "Our cemetery remains in the same condition. It is an irregularly shaped piece of land inclosed by a board fence. It must remain so until enough interest is manifested to make it better. Our dead are at least buried decently, and it is a blessing for which we cannot be too thankful."

Unfortunately all trace of this foreign cemetery has long since been lost.

IN FEBRUARY, 1874, Mr. Kenney organized a Sunday School in Havana. There were twenty-two pupils, and he was a teacher. He wrote that he hoped to make it the foundation for a day-school. Three years later his report said that steps had been taken to establish an English high school or college, but it never became possible to carry this plan out. The Sunday School work was, however, strengthened and expanded, and instruction was given in Spanish as well as in English.

The second year he was here Mr. Kenney began going to Matanzas for Sunday evening services. The next year he extended his ministrations to Cardenas. Think of the energy of the man! Lack of funds to obtain assistance for this work obliged him to later curtail it. He was alone in the midst of uncounted calls and opportunities.

In 1876 one of the largest estates on the island was placed under his spiritual direction, numbering 600 souls. There and in Havana Mr. Kenney began work among the Chinese, securing Christian literature for them in their own language and having the able assistance of a layman in Havana, Professor Charles Hasselbrink. Application to start a school among the Chinese received no attention from the government, but a Chinese club was organized.

Work was also begun at this time among the Negroes on the plantation and in the city. Much delay was encountered in getting the government's permission to open a Sunday School for them in Havana. Mr. Kenney found that little or nothing was being done for them and the Negroes themselves came to him for advice and help. They were of course just emerging from slavery. In six months 600 Bibles and prayer books were given to Negroes on their personal application for them.

The officers and seamen who came to this port on the merchant ships were always Mr. Kenney's special care. He held services Sunday evenings on board the vessels and was inspired by the heartiness of the worship of the men. During the terrible months of the yellow fever epidemics he was their constant friend, unto death—and beyond death. In 1880 he finally succeeded in obtaining a reading and meeting room on shore for seamen's use.

All through this time there was never any attempt made at proselyting, not the slightest. Spanish and Cubans, however, began to inquire about the kind of religion that this man of Christ represented. Some of them came to services and asked for Bibles and prayer books. But Mr. Kenney's main object was to help the Americans and other foreigners in Cuba to show by their lives what their religion really stood for.

I HAVE before me, as I write this, one of Mr. Kenney's first reports from Cuba. It is in his own handwriting, strong, clear, firm, the remarkable hand of this pioneer of twenty-five. Evidently Edward Kenney had precisely the qualities most needed for his difficult field of work—tact, patience, determination, practical common sense, a deep religious nature, deep love for his fellow-men of whatever race or creed, and an extraordinary capacity for self-denial. More than once he was at death's door from yellow fever. He used to remain in Havana through the summer to care for the sick and the dying, and then he would go to the States to raise money so that he might return and continue his varied and arduous work.

Here are some excerpts from his letters of the summer of 1879:

"June 18. It is almost impossible to write, the weather is so extremely warm and oppressive. During the last two days the rain has come to us in torrents, in floods—and the malaria arising afterwards is far from agreeable. Within the last ten days we have lost two captains with the vomito—terrible cases. Yesterday I read the burial office over the remains of Captain ——— in our Hospital Chapel. He had been dying for three days, and decomposition had set in long before he breathed his last; and at the burial the body was in a terrible state, beyond description. Only by the constant application of camphor could I get through the services. It made me sick. I caught cold, and today I am far from well. . . . No one witnesses these scenes but myself; even the friends of the dying and the dead keep aloof. Yesterday I said the office for the dead in a deserted chapel only a few coffin bearers being outside the door."

July 9. "We have lost four captains within a few days with the fever. I pity these poor fellows. We are having the fever in earnest. Three funerals yesterday, two today. I have just left the bed-sides of three dying men."

July 18. "We are having indeed a dread time. One hundred and thirty-six persons died of yellow fever here yesterday, and the sickness seems to be increasing. . . . We have lost two American captains within two days."

July 29. "I have just come from the steamship 'Niagara' (Mr. Ward's line), lying in the harbor. Mr. Elwyn C. Weld, the purser, died on board late this afternoon of the yellow fever. He was a young man, a good friend of mine, and took much interest in our work. We brought his body ashore after laying it out, and I shall bury him tomorrow. The sickness increases, and it is not only the sick who have to be looked after, but everything else must be taken care of.

I visited forty-three sick today. It is horrible to see the stages of the disease, and makes me constantly sick."

On account of his health Mr. Kenney was obliged to leave Cuba in the autumn of 1880, at the age of thirty-two, and though he later recovered his health and strength in part, he was never again a well man. He had indeed sacrificed himself in his labors here for others. He was married in 1888, and had parishes in and near New York. He died in New York on June 15, 1899, aged fifty-one.

During his nine years here, from 1871 to 1880, Edward Kenney was the only non-Roman clergyman in Cuba.

He opened the way for all the Christian work that later came to this island.

He should not be the forgotten pioneer.

Coutesy Episcopal Church Publishing Co.

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Mr. Ranney:

Here is the article, as promised.

About that photograph. Apparently the publication in which it appeared, Heraldo Episcopal, was a Cuban publication, for Cuban Episcopalians.

As it still operated some ten years into Castro's regime, there would seem to be a possibility that it is still afloat. Do you know if that is so? They may have the original, or an original of the picture.

Best regards,

A. Lawrence

Allen Lawrence